

May a Muslim Initiate Greetings with non-Muslims or Not?

by

Bassam Zawadi

Argument

The Qur'an makes it clear that one may initiate greetings of peace with non-Muslims:

[Abraham] said, "Peace will be upon you. I will ask forgiveness for you of my Lord. Indeed, He is ever gracious to me." - 19:47

"And the servants of the Most Gracious are those who walk on the earth in humility, and when the ignorant address them, they say, "peace!" - 25:63

"And when they hear vain talk, they turn away from there and say: "To us our deeds, and to you yours; Peace be to you: we seek not the ignorant." - 28:55

Yet we read in the hadith literature like in Saheeh Muslim, Book 26, Number 5389 the following:

*Abu Huraira reported Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) as saying: **Do not greet the Jews and the Christians before they greet you** and when you meet any one of them on the roads force him to go to the narrowest part of it.*

Does this not contradict what we have read in the Qur'an?

Response

Before proceeding, one must bear in mind that there are a number of scholarly opinions regarding the rules of greeting a non-Muslim,¹ however for the sake of argument, we will proceed with the majority opinion, which states that the Muslim must not greet the People of the Book with the greetings of peace before they do. This opinion does not contradict the aforementioned Qur'anic verses, as I shall demonstrate insha'Allah.

Allah states in Surah 19:47:

[Abraham] said, "Peace will be upon you. I will ask forgiveness for you of my Lord. Indeed, He is ever gracious to me."

Here, "peace be upon you" or "assalamu 'alayka" is not a salam of "greeting", but rather a salam of assurance and security that Prophet Ibrahim ('alayhi assalaam) would let his father be on his

¹ See my article: [Rules of Greeting Non-Muslims in Islam](#).

own and make up his own choice free from any form of harm (whether in hurtful words or physical harm) coming from Ibrahim ('alayhi assalaam) toward him.² Another opinion was that this was a salam of farewell³ or abandonment⁴ and not a salam of greeting. Another possibility is that Ibrahim ('alayhi assalaam) prayed for peace upon his father as a way to soften his father's heart and attract him to his call,⁵ hence it was a salam of prayer and not a salam of greeting.

In conclusion, there is no strong reason for us to believe that Ibrahim ('alayhi assalaam) in Surah 19:47 was necessarily giving his father a salam of greeting. With that in mind, there is no reason to conclude that this passage necessarily stands at odds with the hadith stating that we should not greet Christians and Jews first.

Let us now look at Surah 25:63, which states:

“And the servants of the Most Gracious are those who walk on the earth in humility , and when the ignorant address them, they say, **“peace!”**”

It must be borne in mind that the word "peace" or *salaama* does not necessarily have to be read as a quote. For instance, look at the translation by Saheeh International:

And the servants of the Most Merciful are those who walk upon the earth easily, and when the ignorant address them [harshly], they **say [words of] peace,**

or the translation by Hilali-Khan:

And the slaves of the Most Beneficent (Allah) are those who walk on the earth in humility and sedateness, and when the foolish address them (with bad words) **they reply back with mild words of gentleness.**

This is not a twisting of the Arabic; rather, the literal translation would be "say peace" and "say peace" does not have to be understood as meaning literally "say the word 'peace.'" but could also mean "speak peacefully."⁶

Secondly, even if we assume for the sake of argument that it literally means that the word “peace” should be said, then the same scenario exists here as it does in 19:47. Who said that it is

² See the commentaries of Abu Bakr al-Jazaa'iri, Ibn Kathir, al-Baghawi, al-Baidaawi, as-Sa'di, and az-Zamakhshari on 19:47.

³ Abu Hayyan al-Andalusi said in his commentary *al-Bahr al-Muheet*:

وقيل : هي تحية مفارق

⁴ Imam al-Baghawi stated in his commentary *Ma'aalim at-Tanzeel*:

وقيل : هذا سلام هجران ومفارقة

⁵ Az-Zamakhshari said in his commentary *al-Kashaaf*:

ويجوز أن يكون قد دعا له بالسلامة استمالة له.

⁶ This opinion was adopted by several scholars.

a "peace" of greeting? Linguistically, *salaama* could either be a salam of greeting or a salam of disavowal (i.e., that one is disassociating himself from those people and wishing them a permanent farewell).⁷ So again, we ask why it should be taken as a salam of greeting.

Even with Surah 28:55, the scenario is the same as the previous two mentioned verses.⁸

In conclusion, no convincing case has been put forward demonstrating a necessary contradiction between the Qur'an and the ahaadith on the subject of initiating greetings to non-Muslims.

⁷ Imam al-Qurtubi stated in his commentary, *al-Jaami' li-Ahkaam al-Qur'an*:

قال النحاس: ليس "سلاما" من التسليم إنما هو من التسلم; تقول العرب: سلاما، أي تسلما منك، أي براءة منك

⁸ See the commentaries of as-Sa'di, al-Baghawi, and Ibn Ashur on 28:55.